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The Dead Drop

Each week, the Dead Drop uses its own sources and methods to bring you the latest gossip and interesting tidbits of intel from the national security world. This week:

- Former Acting Director of the CIA John McLaughlin says ciao to CIAOMF
- The Navy sets it sights on new UFO guidelines
- How the word ‘spy’ is being spun by pretty much everyone these days

Pick up this week's Dead Drop here..

Expert Take: What are the Russians Doing in Venezuela?

There are multiple international dynamics at play in Venezuela this week, particularly between the U.S., which is supporting the uprising of Venezuelan opposition leader Juan Guaido, and Russia, a supporter of the government of Nicolas Maduro.

- Secretary of State Mike Pompeo made a strong and unusually public allegation this week that President Maduro was ready to leave the country and that Russia had convinced him to stay.
- **Russian officials** denied it and called Washington's 'interference' in the country a "most grave violation of international law."

The Cipher Brief is fascinated by the dynamics at play and we tapped Cipher Brief expert and former member of CIA's Senior Intelligence Service, **Steven Hall**, to talk about what's going on behind the scenes in Venezuela.

Read it here

Intel Brief: Social Media on the Political Agenda

Later this month, French President Emmanuel Macron and New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern will co-host a conference with the stated objective of regulating violent extremist content online.

- The conference is in response to the live-streamed and downloadable March 15 terrorist attacks at two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand.

- A fierce debate continues to rage in Western democracies about the extent to which social media should be regulated, and whether social media
platforms do it themselves or if governments must.

- Well-intended efforts in restricting inflammatory and even malicious content tend to have unintended consequences and second and third order effects.

Read the full Intel Brief

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The Headlines: U.S. airstrikes report fewer civilian casualties than watchdog groups; U.S. weighs additional sanctions on Iran; Assange appears in UK court for extradition hearing; Brazil's Vice President says Guaido's attempted uprising premature; Venezuela's top court orders arrest of opposition activist Lopez; U.S. boosts natural gas exports to EU; Hungary's prime minister Orban to meet with Trump; President of Kosovo calls on U.S. to help normalize relations with Serbia; Serbia's defense minister says his country could ditch EU and turn to

Russia; Police in China use app to track 'suspicious' citizens; Chinese activities in the arctic topic of new Pentagon report; Police in Sri Lanka fear a second round of attacks; Thialand's new King coronated on Saturday; Hezbollah Secretary General Nasrallah said on Thursday that any Israeli forces who enter Lebanon will be destroyed; Saudi Arabia releases four women; New U.S. ambassador to Saudi Arabia arrived on Thursday; Russia/Syria intensify airstrikes and shelling in rebel-held northwestern Syria; Security forces in Benin fire on protesters; Prosecutors in Sudan order Bashir to be interrogated...

The Lead

U.S. Airstrikes and Raids Killed 120 Civilians in 2018, Pentagon Says. The U.S. military killed 120 civilians in strikes, raids, and firefights across two continents in 2018, the Pentagon said Thursday—a far lower number than what watchdog groups have reported. The Defense Department's annual report to Congress said 42 civilians were killed in Iraq and Syria during operations against the Islamic State, and 76 in Afghanistan as U.S. troops fought extremist groups and resurgent Taliban militants. The Pentagon also acknowledged that two civilians were killed in Somalia. There were no civilians killed in Yemen during U.S. airstrikes against al-Qaeda and the Islamic State affiliates there. ***The New York Times***

Washington Weighs Additional Sanctions on Iran. The Trump administration is considering targeting more companies and financial institutions that do business with the Iran in an attempt to cut off lucrative sources of U.S. dollar-denominated hard currency. The new sanctions on banks and businesses would be aimed at choking off trade including Iran's petrochemical sales to Singapore and its consumer-goods sales to Afghanistan. The prospect of added pressure on Iran comes as Washington kicked off a fresh round of sanctions on Iranian oil exports on Thursday. The U.S. ban is aimed at coercing Iran into reaching a new nuclear and security pact. ***The Wall Street Journal***

Julian Assange Appears in Court for U.S. Extradition Hearing. Julian Assange, the founder of WikiLeaks, appeared in a British court on Thursday for a hearing on whether he will be extradited to the United States to face prosecution in connection with one of the most serious leaks of classified material in U.S. history. Assange made a brief appearance by video link in a London court from Belmarsh Prison in another part of the city. A day earlier, he was sentenced to 50 weeks in prison for bail-jumping. Thursday's hearing

lasted just a few minutes, in which Assange told the judge that he did not wish to surrender himself to be prosecuted in the United States for what he called "journalism that has won many awards." His next hearing is scheduled for May 30. ***The New York Times*** ***The Wall Street Journal*** ***The Washington Post***

The Americas

Brazil: Vice President Says Guaidó's Attempted Uprising Not a Good Idea. Vice President Hamilton Mourao on Thursday said that Venezuelan opposition leader Juan Guaidó's attempt to oust President Maduro was not the best decision and premature. "We don't see light at the end of the tunnel," Mourao said, expressing his concern that the crisis could spark a civil war. Mourao said that cracks are emerging in the lower ranks of Venezuela's armed forces, but not among the commanders. The vice president, whose remarks contradicted President Bolsonaro's position, has repeatedly challenged Bolsonaro on a series of issues. ***Reuters***

Venezuela: Court Orders Arrest of Oppositionist in Spanish Embassy. Venezuela's top court on Thursday ordered the arrest of Leopoldo López, an opposition activist who took refuge in the Spanish Embassy after joining an attempt to topple President Nicolás Maduro this week. The Supreme Tribunal of Justice instructed police to detain López for violating terms of his house arrest. The Spanish government said it has no intention of turning over Lopez, hoping Venezuela would respect the rights of the embassy and Lopez's asylum. ***NPR*** ***Reuters***

Western Europe

U.S. Boosts Natural Gas Exports to EU to Dent Russian Sales. The United States has nearly tripled its natural-gas exports to the EU since July and signed new licenses Thursday seeking to establish American energy as an EU mainstay. Washington's liquefied natural-gas push comes as the EU seeks to

preserve a trade truce with President Trump and avoid potential U.S. tariffs on cars. It also aims to break Russia's grip on European energy markets. U.S. Energy Secretary Rick Perry hailed the burgeoning trade as "the tip of the iceberg" during a visit to Brussels on Thursday, where he signed two new export licenses. ***The Wall Street Journal***

Central and Eastern Europe

Hungary: Orban to Meet Trump at White House. After years of receiving the cold shoulder from Washington, Hungary's nationalist prime minister, Viktor Orban, will visit the White House to meet Donald Trump on 13 May. Hungarian authorities announced the visit on Thursday and said that "energy security, defense cooperation, bilateral relations, and regional security" would be on the agenda. Prime Minister since 2010, Orbán was shunned under Barack Obama's administration, and the State Department frequently criticized his government for weakening democracy and rule of law and stifling media freedom.
The Guardian

Kosovo: President Calls on U.S. to Help Normalize Relations with Serbia. President Hashim Thaci said that Washington must have a leading role in the process of normalizing relations between Kosovo and Serbia, because the EU is too weak and not united. Kosovo, a former province of Serbia, declared independence in 2008 in a move rejected by Belgrade. Both Kosovo and Serbia aspire to join the EU, which has made the normalization of relations a precondition. EU-mediated negotiations between Pristina and Belgrade broke down in 2018 over reports of a proposed land swap and after Kosovo imposed a 100 percent tax on Serbian imports in November.
Radio Free Europe

Serbia: Minister Threatens to Ditch EU Bid and Turn to Russia. Serbia's pro-Russian defense minister on Thursday said that the Balkan country could ditch its EU membership goals for close ties with Moscow. In blunt comments to a pro-government TV channel, Aleksandar Vulin said that "in case the EU doesn't want Serbia, there are others who do." Serbia seeks EU membership, but its populist leaders have gradually steered Serbia toward Russia. Moscow backs Serbia's stance over Kosovo, which declared independence from Serbia in 2008.

Fox News

Asia

China: Police Use App to Track 'Suspicious' Xinjiang Citizens. Chinese police are using a mobile app to collect data on Uighurs in Xinjiang province, according to a report from Human Rights Watch released on Thursday. Xinjiang authorities are keeping logs on 36 types of 'suspicious' behavior such as electricity and gas consumption, money given to mosques, or if a person's phone is on or off. The surveillance app was created by the China Electronics Technology Group, which has been contracted by the Chinese government before for facial-recognition products. ***CNN*** ***The Washington Post***

China: Creating a More Reliable Second Strike Nuclear Capability. Chinese activities in the Arctic region could pave the way for a strengthened military presence, including the deployment of submarines meant to deter a nuclear attack, according to a Pentagon report released on Thursday. Each of China's four Jin-class submarines is armed with up to 12 ballistic missiles that can carry a nuclear warhead with a range of 4,500 miles. ***The New York Times***

Sri Lanka: Police Fear a Second Round of Attacks. Police say arrests and searches of locations linked to the perpetrators of the Easter bombings have turned up evidence that new attacks could be in the works. Despite a dragnet that has yielded more than 100 arrests, authorities are concerned that attacks could target places of worship and schools of the majority Sinhalese Buddhist community. On Thursday, police said they had found 36 sets of women's white clothes of the sort worn to Buddhist temples hidden in a van in Anuradhapura, a major religious city for Buddhists. Police say they have found other outfits attackers could use to blend in, including military uniforms, as well as bags similar to those used by the suicide bombers on Easter Sunday. ***The Wall Street Journal***

Thailand: King Rama X's Coronation to be Held Saturday. King Maha Vajiralongkorn Bodindradebayavarangkun will be crowned the tenth king of the Chakri dynasty on Saturday, when he will take the title King Rama X. On Wednesday, the King married Suthida Tidjai, giving her the title of Queen Suthida. Thailand's new queen made her first official public appearance at the side of King Rama X on Thursday. ***Reuters*** ***France 24***

The Middle East and North Africa

Lebanon: Nasrallah Says Israeli Forces Will be Destroyed. Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah on Thursday said that any Israeli forces who dare to enter the south of Lebanon will be destroyed. Nasrallah's remarks came after media reported an Israeli plan to wage a war against Lebanon, which he stated is aimed at pressing the Lebanese state to "surrender and offer concessions." ***i24News*** ***The Times of Israel***

Saudi Arabia: Four Women Released Over Rights Issues. Saudi authorities on Thursday temporarily freed four more women facing trial over charges related to human rights work and contacts with foreign journalists and diplomats. They join three other women released over a month ago on condition that they continue to appear in court. Most of the detentions, numbering around a dozen, occurred last year in the weeks before and after a ban on women driving cars in the conservative kingdom was lifted amid efforts to relax social rules and boost the economy. ***The Wall Street Journal*** ***CNN***

Saudi Arabia: New U.S. Ambassador Arrives in Riyadh. The new U.S. ambassador to Saudi Arabia, retired general John Abizaid, arrived in Riyadh on Thursday. Washington has not had an ambassador in Riyadh since January 2017, a 27-month period in which U.S.-Saudi ties have become increasingly complicated over issues including the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi. Trump nominated Abizaid, who led CENTCOM during the Iraq war, for the position in November 2018. He was approved by the Senate in April. ***The National***

Syria: Russia, Syrian Army Attack Rebel-Held Northwest. Russia and the Syrian Army intensified airstrikes and shelling in rebel-held northwestern Syria on Thursday, the heaviest assault since the area was declared a demilitarized zone. The targeted villages and towns in northern Hama and southern Idlib fall within a buffer zone agreed to last September between Russia and Turkey as part of a deal that averted a offensive on the area, which is now home to three million people. Opposition-run civil defense agencies say hundreds of people, mostly civilians, have been killed by the escalation in Russian and Syrian strikes since the September deal. ***Al-Jazeera*** ***Arab News***

Sub-Saharan Africa

Benin: Security Forces Fire on Protesters. Security forces on Thursday fired on protesters who were demonstrating against the results of Sunday's parliamentary election. Hundreds of civilians have protested the exclusion of opposition parties from the election and called for President Patrice Talon to step down. There has been no confirmation of the number of casualties. ***Al-Jazeera*** ***France 24***

Sudan: Prosecutor Orders Bashir to be Interrogated. Sudan's public prosecutor has called for former President Omar al-Bashir to be interrogated on money laundering and financing terrorism charges. The prosecutor also ordered other unidentified senior figures to be investigated for financial crimes. Hundreds of thousands of protesters have joined a sit-in in Khartoum to demand that the army give control to civilians. Protesters and activists have been negotiating with the Transitional Military Council to create a joint civilian-military body to rule Sudan until elections can be held, but no solution has been reached. ***Reuters***

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